

Fans Want to Dance Like the Stars

By John Pitcher, Omaha World-Herald, Neb.

Dec. 30--It's a quarter past six at the Simply Ballroom dance studio, and Cook and Jerry Olson are going through their paces.

Standing in front of a full-length mirror, they slowly practice their steps, using their feet to trace out imaginary lines on the floor. There are a few awkward moments -- the Olsons are relatively new dance students. All the same, this husband-and-wife team seems elated.

"We never could have done this a year ago," says Cook Olson. "In just a short time, we've learned a lot and have already been in one competition, and I think we're doing extremely well."

The Olsons, who live in Papillion and drive a couple of times a week to Simply Ballroom at Irvington Road and North 90th Street in west Omaha, are part of two related and growing trends.

First, Cook is one of 20 million viewers tuning in for each episode of the hit reality TV show "Dancing With the Stars"; Jerry also watches it, but less faithfully. The couple plan to be front and center at the Qwest Center Omaha on Wednesday, when the show brings its live tour to Omaha.

But the Olsons also are part of another group, fans who have taken their appreciation for the show to the next level, becoming dancers themselves.

LaTisha Adams-Ennis, who works at Union Pacific during the day and dances at Simply Ballroom at night, credits the show with getting her on the dance floor.

"I've always liked dance of all kinds, but the show refocused my interest in ballroom," she says. "So I just had to come out and do it myself."

A lot of people throughout the country are doing the same thing.

USA Dance, a national nonprofit group devoted to getting ballroom dance into the Olympics, reports a 30 percent increase in its membership since the debut of "Dancing With the Stars" five seasons ago.

There are about 200 USA Dance chapters across the United States, and on any given weekend those chapters have about 23,000 dues-paying members hoofing it on dance floors, says Angela Prince, a USA Dance spokeswoman.

Add to that the number of non-dues-paying dancers who participate in USA Dance-sponsored events, and the number mushrooms to about 150,000.

Some of those dancers are right here in Nebraska.

USA Dance has a chapter in Lincoln (information on that group can be found at dancenebraska.org), and attendance at its monthly events has increased 40 percent since "Dancing With the Stars" went on the air, says Dick Kahle, the chapter's vice president.

"We probably get 40 members coming out to dance every month," he says. "But you don't have to be a member to come to our events, so we usually have 60 or more."

People seem to be dancing more often in Omaha as well.

Dave Greguska, owner of Arthur's, a bar and grill near 114th Street and West Dodge Road, says he's seen a surge in interest in dancing, from swing to salsa.

"There's so much interest that I'm looking to start up a new event here called 'Dancing in the Bars,'" he says.

El Museo Latino, located near South 25th and L Streets, has likewise been packing them in for its Saturday Salsa.

"We'll probably get 100 to 150 coming to dance, and you know these guys are serious because we only serve soft drinks," says Magdalena Garcia, the museum's director.

Prince says she doesn't know how many Americans are dancing every weekend. But factoring in college and private dance students along with other recreational and competitive dancers, she estimates that more than a million people in this country show off their fancy footwork every week.

And that figure pales in comparison with the number of people participating in ballroom dance in places such as China, says Peter Pover, USA Dance's incoming president.

"It's a staggering number, amounting to tens of millions of people," he says.

Pover concedes that "Dancing With the Stars" has contributed to the worldwide interest in ballroom and other competitive dance forms.

"The show has been very smart in the celebrity dancers it picks," he says. "You bring in Emmitt Smith and suddenly football fans who would otherwise never watch the show are watching."

Yet Pover is quick to point out that "Dancing With the Stars" did not create a dance craze. Rather, the show capitalized on an interest that already was well developed, both in America and abroad.

"When I first started competing in America in 1981, there were maybe a couple of hundred people involved in serious, competitive dance sport," he says. "Today, when you include college dancers, the number is more like 10,000."

Pover says the dance renaissance came about partly because the former Soviet Union collapsed.

The Soviets treated dance the same way they treated classical music, gymnastics, even their space program -- it was all a matter of political propaganda. So the communists always made sure their dancers were the best.

"When the wall came down, all the great Soviet dancers came here, so all of a sudden we had all the best dancers and teachers," Pover says. "That increased the quality of dance in America, and that in turn helped increase the interest."

But there are more straightforward reasons dance has grown in popularity, he says.

"It's a terrific activity that's both recreational and great exercise."

Joan Udes, who lives in the Armbrust Oaks neighborhood and has an oak ballroom floor in her basement, seconds Pover's assessment.

"Dance is just the healthiest sport," she says. "It's helped me keep my weight down and my blood pressure down, and I can do it without ever going to a gym."

Recreation is just as important as health at Simply Ballroom, and owner Rachele Pasqualetto is quick to give "Dancing With the Stars" some credit for packing her studio.

"I think we're definitely getting a lot more young people because of the show," she says. "But we also get a lot of people because dance is such an easy activity to take up if you're a beginner."

The Olsons, who are both baby boomers, fit into that category. They started about a year ago, when Jerry bought two lessons as a birthday present for Cook, a true-blue "Dancing With the Stars" fan.

"After that, I took up the challenge of continuing with more lessons, and we've been at it ever since," says Jerry, whose newfound skills allowed him to dance at his daughter's wedding last September.

Cook says her favorite dance is the fast-paced cha-cha. Jerry, on the other hand, is definitely a slower, three-quarter-time waltz guy. Yet they both share a sincere love for their new hobby. And, oh, yeah, they both love "Dancing With the Stars."

"I never miss the show and I always vote," says Cook. "And you know, most of the time my vote gets it exactly right."

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